

DRIVER RESEARCH BRIEF: CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

A research brief to maximize
the success of African American
male students

About this brief

This research brief brings to life Kingmakers of Oakland's driver research through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative equity work nationally, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for African American/Black male youth.

The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for educators and community partners to use during professional learning and collaborative conversations. This research brief explores how schools and educators can work together to build a shared understanding of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy.



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Focus

Culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy is paramount to transforming teaching and learning for Black boys¹. The National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has conducted decades of research in high-performing urban schools to identify how educators can best ensure Black boys' success in school. According to NCUST research, high-performing urban schools share three key characteristics: positive transformational culture, effective instruction, and access to rigorous curricula.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is firmly rooted in two of the most widely recognized researchers on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching: Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay. Both Ladson-Billings and Gay emphasize the principal role of culture and language in learning and academic achievement. Ladson-Billings defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”² Gay defined culturally responsive teaching “as the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”³

Ladson-Billings' seminal research provides a three-part framework that continues to guide the field today: (1) student academic success, (2) cultural competency, and (3) critical consciousness.⁴ The Kingmakers of Oakland (KOO) aligns this robust research base on culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy to NCUST's overarching characteristics of America's best urban schools. Principally, KOO aims to inspire educators to cultivate engaging, encouraging, and empowering instructional spaces that honor students' identities and elevate the genius within Black boys.



Positive Transformational Culture

To nurture spaces where Black boys experience authentic engagement, educators need to collectively and actively grow a *positive transformational culture*. In these supportive classroom communities, educators radiate a passionate belief in the ability of Black boys to achieve

outstanding outcomes, and they inspire others to recognize the beauty, value, and brilliance of Black boys.⁵ Educators hold high expectations that all students graduate from high school prepared to pursue their selected college, career, and life paths.

Importantly, these educators (1) build trusting, inclusive classroom cultures where all students report a sense of belonging to question and share their thinking and simultaneously (2) engage students in intellectually rigorous learning that challenges Black youth to make meaning, access knowledge, solve problems, and take risks. In short, culturally relevant educators provide strong instructional support through a cultural lens.⁶ To be clear, in high-performing schools, lessons are designed to master key concepts and skills, which are typically grounded in state and district standards. It is the instructional practices and strategies within a caring, supportive environment that sparks student engagement.⁷

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In practice, this means educators collaborate regularly to establish practices and routines that center belonging and joy in school. They intentionally work to strengthen relationships as they also plan to build students' academic and cognitive skills. For example, staff dedicate time and energy to follow up with students and families when they miss school⁸ to ensure students know their teachers care about them and need them in the learning environment. Similarly, educators take a restorative, equity-centered approach to school discipline: they understand the research on persistent discriminatory discipline practices, engage in ongoing dialogue with staff about implicit bias, and actively promote a positive school climate.⁹ For example, classroom teachers can collect qualitative information about their students' strengths and needs through icebreaker activities, journals, presentations, home visits and interviews.¹⁰

Effective Instruction

For educators to design supportive and liberating learning experiences for Black boys, *effective instruction* is key. The essence of effective instruction for Black boys means that educators recognize and leverage the cultural capital and assets that students bring to the classroom. In doing so, educators design and plan dynamic instruction that reflects and honors their students' cultures and life experiences. Specifically, they select engaging instructional materials that integrate real-world issues that are important to Black youth and their communities. They also maximize student engagement by consistently checking for understanding and making adjustments where needed. These effective educators note "what students understood, the depth of understanding, and the reason behind their understanding."¹¹ In practice, educators record real-time written and verbal responses as students reflect individually or in pairs using low-tech (whiteboards) and high-tech tools. Through a robust process that involves building fluency with key lesson vocabulary,

including reading, researching, collaborating, considering solutions, and writing, students see themselves as community change agents. Educators integrate assessment tools, routines, and approaches (i.e., rubrics, student portfolios, student-led writing conferences) to inform instructional practice and ensure Black boys meet and exceed the learning goals.

The research is clear: Black boys need educators who are warm demanders.¹² Warm demanders focus on both mastery and relationships. The term “warm demander,” originally coined by Kleinfield (1975) to describe highly effective teachers in Native American Alaskan communities,¹³ was popularized by researcher, Lisa Delpit.¹⁴ Delpit explains that “warm demanders expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment.”¹⁵ Warm demanders (i.e., teachers) look in the mirror at their own cultural values and beliefs, and they become dedicated students of their students’ cultures, values, beliefs, behaviors, and learning styles. Culturally and linguistically responsive teachers understand the cultural continuum between individualistic and collectivist worldviews, and they know that most Black boys learn best in collaborative, interactive, and emotionally safe learning environments.¹⁶ For example, warm demanders leverage the communal competencies their Black boys bring to the classroom, and students see their deep cultures, histories, and communities reflected in the curriculum.¹⁷ Likewise, warm demanders understand the idea of race is an entirely social construct, and they make connections to the larger sociopolitical factors that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities. Warm demanders focus on relationship and mastery to increase students’ sense of belonging and guide students to improve their academic achievement. Additionally, warm demanders understand that learning is tightly interwoven with trust and relational capital.¹⁸

Challenging Curricula

For educators to design supportive and liberating learning experiences for Black boys, *challenging curricula* is essential. Reading liberates and empowers, and curricular tools, including texts (i.e., books, posters, videos, music), learning platforms, and evaluation tools (i.e., rubrics), need to cultivate students’ abilities to recognize, understand, and critique injustices.¹⁹ Likewise, the curricula must reflect and represent Black boys (i.e., authors and characters) in accurate and positive portrayals.

One relevant facet of identifying and designing challenging curricula for Black boys is to understand the significant role literacy has played in American history.²⁰ For example abolitionists who sought to end slavery in the early 1800s spread their message largely through the written word.²¹ In response, supporters of slavery in the antebellum South began tightening literacy laws in the early 1830s.²² Simultaneously, young Black men started what were called *literary societies*, where they discussed and debated their new learning to create a more just society.²³ These 19th century Black literary societies provide a blueprint for how to improve literacy for Black boys today: connect the curriculum to students’ cultural and linguistic histories, lived experiences, and collective activism.²⁴

To create these pertinent curricular connections, Black boys need access to high-quality instructional materials that integrate real-world community issues — texts worth reading, researching, writing and speaking about. This is what makes curricula challenging: when Black boys see themselves as community change agents. Yet, access to high-quality literacy curriculum and pedagogy for Black boys continues to contribute to disparities in reading achievement.²⁵ According to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading reported that in 2014, only 14 percent of Black boys read proficiently by 4th grade compared to 42 percent of White boys.²⁶



The striking lack of representation in children’s literature has been well-documented.²⁷ Representation matters — and this begins by building agency through stories in the early grades. To counter the profusion of deficit views Black boys see and hear about themselves in the media, — a way to celebrate the idea that young Black boys and men can be happy, too — shifts the narrative from tragic headlines to examples of Black excellence.²⁸ When educators center Black boy joy, they affirm their identities and experiences.²⁹ For example, teachers across schools and classrooms should use what Tatum calls “enabling texts.”³⁰ A text that embodies aspects that enable should do the following: (1) focus on the collective struggle of African Americans; (2) promote a healthy psyche; (3) reflect an awareness of the real world; and (4) serve as a roadmap for being, doing, thinking, and acting. Challenging curriculum supports Black boys to see their perspectives, their ways of being, and themselves in the world.

Implications and Actions

Culturally relevant curriculum and instruction matters. Manifesting this goal requires a collective commitment to engage Black boys in rigorous academic learning supported by an affirming culture of high expectations. Educators and policy makers need to leverage an asset-based framework as they actively seek to understand the educational experiences that Black boys and adolescents encounter in their educational journeys and build dynamic mentoring and leadership networks with Black boys.

Actions for Educators

(teachers, support staff, administrators):

- Ignite a passionate stance among staff to celebrate the beauty, value, and brilliance of Black boys
- Ensure access, opportunities, and the proper supports for Black male youth to participate in and achieve in advanced-level courses
- Provide teachers time to reflect on their individual and collective practice in meaningful ways, including analyzing data through an asset-based lens
- Identify mentor teachers and create time for peer-to-peer observations to improve practice and underscore the shared responsibility for Black boys' success
- Select curricula that reflect and represent Black boys (i.e., authors and characters) in accurate and positive ways
- Provide professional learning in asset-based literacy instructional practices (i.e., language varieties and bidialectal experiences)
- Integrate enabling texts into the curricular scope and sequence

Actions for Policy Makers

(Boards of Education, Departments of Education, legislatures):

- Ensure all school district employees and board members receive regular and ongoing professional development regarding issues of race and racism, (e.g., implicit bias, explicit bias, racism and anti-racism)
- Create and monitor policies to ensure Black boys and adolescents have the necessary coursework (i.e., high school graduation requirements) to apply and get accepted into four-year colleges, universities, and career technical education institutions
- Adopt curriculum that is rigorous and relevant

Questions



1. Are there structured opportunities for all staff to reflect on their own identities and inclusion. For example: Share about a time where you felt seen, heard, valued? What specifically did people say and/or do that made you feel that way?
2. How do educators intentionally design and implement opportunities for Black boys to build their agency and voice in a variety of academic contexts?
3. How does classroom learning integrate community-informed ways of reading, writing, thinking and reasoning in the content area?
4. How does classroom learning provide opportunities for Black boys to demonstrate learning? How does the teacher leverage those opportunities to assess learning through an asset-based approach?
5. How does the teacher's understanding of Black boys and their communities inform how the teacher expands and deepens learning?

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